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Washington: The Intellectual War

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 13—When President Johnson was told that the Central Intelligence Agency's secret fund for university students was about to be exposed, he asked when the fund started (1952), and he wanted assurance that the fund had stopped.

His first impulse was to deal not with the problem but with the politics of the problem. Senator Eugene McCarthy, who has been critical of the C.I.A., was telephoned in Florida; Senator William Fulbright, who has been critical of a lot of other things, was told privately what was coming; and the Administration was especially careful to head off any public criticism by Senator Robert Kennedy, who knew all about the fund when he was Attorney General and therefore reacted prudently.

The Basic Problem

The problem, however, remains. It is that the Communist nations, and particularly the Soviet Union, are constantly trying to influence university leaders, labor union leaders, leading writers and other potentially powerful individuals of the coming generation all over the world. Thus not only Mao Tse-tung and the other Chinese Communist leaders, but even Chiang Kai-shek, spent time in Moscow

many years ago as part of Moscow's plan to communize China.

This battle for the allegiance of the coming leaders of the world has never really been faced openly and effectively by the United States Government. Some funds have been voted openly for cultural exchange, and student programs through the State Department, but Representative John Rooney of New York, who presides over the State Department's appropriations, has never been enthusiastic about approving funds for this extremely important intellectual competition, and successive administrations have chosen to evade the problem rather than be candid about it.

That is to say, instead of facing up to Rooney and his powerful associates in the Congress with a very good argument, they evaded them by going underground to the C.I.A. with a very bad and deceptive device. Instead of educating the Congress on the hard facts of a very complex intellectual and political war, they chose instead to corrupt the leaders of the youth organizations, deceive the students, and mislead the Congress, the universities and the country, not to mention embroiling the Government's department of dirty tricks in home front efforts.

The reaction here to this ex-

posed deception is interesting. The White House has stopped the funds and ducked. The State Department has issued an unctuous statement about protecting the integrity of students, and the liberals in the Congress have attacked the C.I.A.

But the C.I.A. is not to blame. Richard Helms, the Director, and Cord Myer, who presided over these programs for him, are high-minded men who were carrying out policies ordered from above. The surprising thing is not that they were caught, but that the C.I.A. got away with this for so long. It does not have the protection of an official secrets act, as in Britain. It has no British "D" notice to warn publications against printing sensitive information. It has a very large personnel turnover. It was confiding to new officers of the student organizations every year. It has been under sharp newspaper surveillance and university criticism, especially since the start of the bombing in Vietnam, and the leaders of the N.S.A. went to Vice President Humphrey last year and urged him to find ways of getting open instead of secret funds.

Yet nothing was done until the evidence was out, and even now the Administration is neither correcting the problem

nor coming clean. It is trapped in other confidences it has taken with other individuals and institutions in the labor unions, newspapers, press and radio of the world, where again its purposes may be laudable but some of its financial arrangements are vulnerable.

The Flaw

What has been needed for a long time, and what is still needed now, is a candid discussion of the problem of subversion, and Congressional approval of a Government-supported, but privately administered institution that will defend the nation's interests in the intellectual communities of the world.

This is what the British have had for generations in The British Council, which provides funds to support a variety of British intellectual, social and political interests. They get along very well over there with their comfortable falsehoods, and they are not above corrupting others, but at least they do not deceive or corrupt themselves.

Maybe something like this will come out of the present controversy here. Meanwhile, our only consolation is that we must not really be such a wicked people, because we run these secret conspiracies so clumsily.